

“It will make you cry, but not only out of sadness. Some of your tears will be for the beauty of love and its miraculous power to heal even the deepest wounds.”

—John Grogan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Marley & Me*

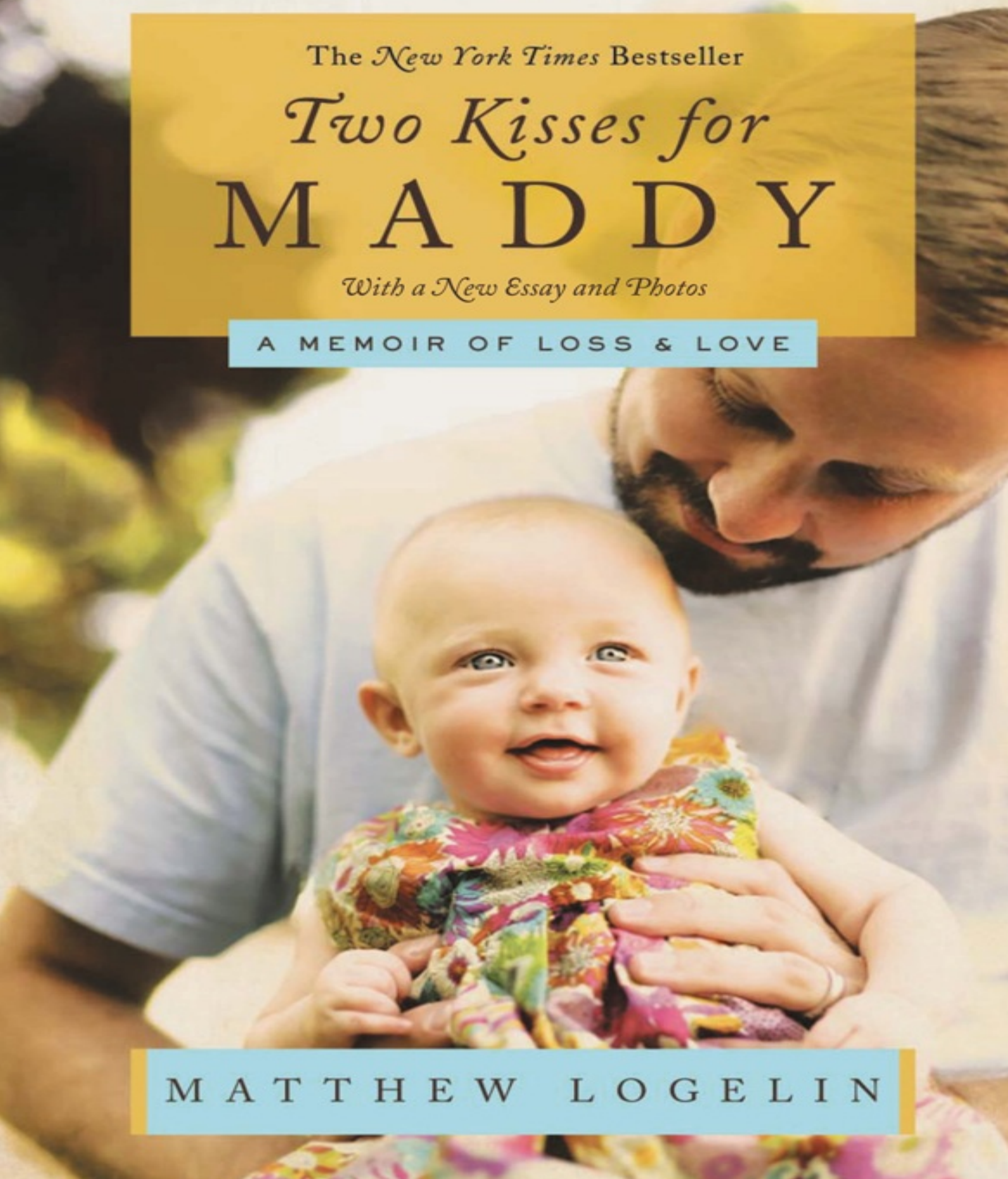
The *New York Times* Bestseller

Two Kisses for
M A D D Y

With a New Essay and Photos

A MEMOIR OF LOSS & LOVE

M A T T H E W L O G E L I N



Two Kisses for Maddy

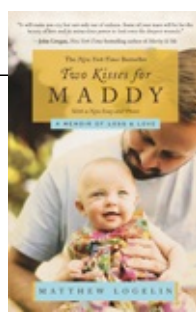
A Memoir of Loss & Love

Matthew Logelin



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for madeline.

Foreword

I am not a writer.

At least, I didn't think I was. But in your hands you hold a book that I wrote.

I wish I hadn't had a reason to write this thing. On the morning of March 25, 2008, my life was the best I ever imagined it could be; an instant later, everything would change. More on that soon, but first I want to share a couple of stories.

I've always been of the mind that great art can only come from a place of immense pain (mostly because I hate happy music), and that the resulting work is beautiful because it is motivated by the purest and most authentic of emotions: sadness. I've never believed so strongly in this axiom as I did in the two moments I'm about to describe...

* * *

September 2000. I was living in Chicago, working my way through the first year of graduate school. While reading Marx, Weber, and Durkheim for my sociological theory class, I discovered a song that more than any other had so far, altered my perspective: "Come Pick Me Up" by Ryan Adams. It was the kind of song I wished I could write—it was sad, it was funny, and it included the word *fuck*. But I loved it mostly because it was sad. The words made me feel something I'd never felt before: hearing the swelling pain of that song made me yearn for the kind of heartache that would allow me to create something—anything—so amazing.

After listening exclusively to this song for a couple of days, I called my girlfriend to tell her about it. "I think I could probably write a song like this, but you've been way too good to me." Liz and I had been dating for just over four years at that point, and we had what I considered a nearly perfect relationship. She had never caused me the kind of agony that would allow me to tap into whatever creative side may have been hiding deep within me. And as much as I wanted to write *The Next Great Depressing Song*, I was glad that I hadn't had the ability—or the need—to do so.

May 2006. I was living in India for a work assignment, and half way through my stay, Liz came to visit. I took a few weeks off so we could travel the country and see things we never imagined we'd have a chance to see. I had a long list of places for us to visit, but Liz insisted we get to one site in particular: the Taj Mahal. Standing in front of one of the Seven Wonders of the World, we listened to our guide tell us the story of how it came to be. He explained that the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan had ordered its construction to fulfill a promise to his wife. Legend has it that on her deathbed—shortly after giving birth to their child—she asked her husband to build her a monument that would forever be known as the most beautiful in the world.

I rolled my eyes, wondering if the story was even true or if it was something the guides fabricated

to make female tourists swoon, but Liz was feeling every word of it. She stared in awe at the mausoleum, her eyes welling with tears and her lips agape. Her sweaty hand squeezed mine tighter and tighter as our guide continued the story. When he finally finished, Liz turned to me and said, “You would never do something like this for me.”

She was right—I can’t build anything. I can barely hang a picture on the wall. But I never imagined a need to do such a thing.

As I began putting this book together, these two stories stuck in my head, and they swirled around and intertwined and coalesced while I wrote it and revised it. They were a huge spark. I hadn’t forgotten about that song, and I hadn’t forgotten about that trip, but before Liz died, I had forgotten exactly what they’d meant to me.

I know that this book is no “Come Pick Me Up” and it’s most certainly no Taj Mahal, but it is my attempt to turn my sadness into something beautiful. It is mine. Mine for Liz. And no matter what, I know that she would be proud of me.

And I guess you could say that I am a writer now. But I really wish I wasn’t.

Part I

it seemed obvious
(though probably only to us),
that we'd
spend the rest of
our lives
together.

I met my future wife, the future mother of my child, at a gas station. It was a Tuesday in late January 1996, and we were both eighteen years old. Though we lived fewer than two miles apart, this was only the second time we had met, as we went to different high schools and ran with different crowds. But that night, when she saw me just a few feet away, Liz Goodman waved and said, “Are you Matt Longlin?” She mispronounced my name, but it was close enough. An awkward and shy teenager lacking a lot of self-confidence, I was shocked when this beautiful blonde girl started talking to me. It was weird at first—girls like Liz didn't talk to boys like me, so I figured she thought I worked at the gas station and she needed some help filling her tank. I responded with a confused look and sheepish “Yeah. That's me,” and continued filling my own tank. I was instantly captivated by Liz's gregariousness, her moxie, and, of course, her beauty. She stood at exactly four feet eleven inches tall but carried herself like she was six feet one. Years later, she would tell me that I had impressed her by holding the door open for her when we walked into the little store to pay. I would counter with my surprise that an act as small as that could convince her to see past my unquestionably awkward looks.

We went on our first date that Friday, January 26. Three days later, standing in her parents' driveway, Liz let the L word slip from her lips. I responded with a smile, a kiss, and an “I love you, too,” and we were both positive that this was it: we'd both found the person of our dreams. We were just a few months away from heading off to college in different states (I was staying put at St. John's in Minnesota, while Liz was off to Scripps in California), so we became almost inseparable, wanting to make the most of the short time we had left together in the same town.

During my spring break trip to Mexico, I purchased calling cards with money that ordinarily might have been used on beer and admission to clubs, and spent almost the entire trip talking to Liz from pay phones while my friends got drunk and made out with random girls. I'm pretty sure I was the only eighteen-year-old male in Mazatlán doing this on his spring break. A month after my return from the trip, Liz was off to Spain, spending three weeks living with a host family as part of a program designed to get high school seniors out of their comfort zones and into a new environment. While there, she used her dad's calling card to talk to me multiple times each day, running up a phone bill so enormous and so shocking that to this day her dad still remembers the amount, down to the penny. As fall approached and we prepared to head off to college, we promised each other that the distance would not come between us. Thanks to these short practice runs, we were confident that we'd be one of those rare high school couples that would make it all the way through our college years with our

relationship—and sanity—intact.

In fact, the distance intensified our relationship—we had to work much harder than the couples we knew who weren't worrying about being apart. Phone and webcam communication became integral so that we could study "together." And no matter where we had been or how late we had been out, we exchanged e-mails nightly. During our four years in college, Liz only missed out on sending four of them compared to my six—a fact that she liked to throw in my face whenever I gave her shit about something later on. When we were able to be together in between our time apart, we truly appreciated it and showed it by walking arm-in-arm through the tree-lined sidewalks of Claremont. Liz spent the money she earned from her on-campus job along with the monthly stipend from her parents to fly me out to California every six to eight weeks. She figured that because she was paying, I should do the flying, and I knew better than to put up a fight. She did visit me enough times for us both to realize that we had more fun together in California anyway. During our summers home, we worked less than half a block apart, using our lunch breaks to make up for the time we had lost during the school year.

Our junior years, we both decided to study abroad for a semester, but knowing one would influence the other's decision, we agreed to discuss our chosen destinations only after the applications had been submitted. Even with a literal world of choices before us, we both picked London. It was incredible to be living in the same city at the same time, without our parents. We both truly felt like we were out in the world on our own for the first time in our lives, but we didn't spend every waking moment together for fear of seriously affecting the other's experience. I know that sounds strange, but we believed that we should continue on as if we were in different parts of the country so that we could both fully experience our semester abroad—but now, we were a forty-five-minute tube ride apart, rather than a four-hour flight. After we finished our studies in London, Liz took off with her friends, and I with mine, to travel around Western Europe. We made a plan to meet up after two weeks, ditch our friends, and travel alone, together. Our paths converged on the island of Corsica, and that was where things changed for both of us. We'd been alone with one another before, but never for two consecutive weeks. We went from Corsica to Italy to Switzerland to Germany, learning what it was like to live happily together as adults. The trip confirmed what we already suspected: ours was a lifelong love—a love that would transcend distance, time, petty disagreements, and any relationship turmoil.

As our college careers came to an end, we were faced with the opportunity to finally live together in the same city on a permanent basis. The only question was, where would we settle? After four years in Southern California, Liz was loath to leave the place, and she took a position with a small consulting firm in downtown Los Angeles. I decided that I wasn't ready to enter the working world quite yet and accepted a generous offer from a graduate school in Chicago, setting out to work toward a PhD in sociology.

These decisions forced us to renew our promise to not let the distance come between us. Against all odds, we had made it work for the past four years—what was a few more? Besides, thanks to her entrance into the real world of working adulthood, Liz would now be making enough money to fly me to Los Angeles more often, or herself to Chicago. Still, we were confident our relationship would last.

Some people would meet Liz and assume that she was all beauty and no brains, but nothing was further from the truth. With her job after college, she turned her sights on becoming a high-powered management consultant. She traveled the country dressed in business suits and high heels, meeting with executives from some of the largest domestic financial institutions. Within seconds of shaking their hands, she'd have them enchanted by her intelligence, poise, humor, and wit. She could astound you with her explanation of some esoteric economic theory, but she also studied the pages of *US*

Weekly and *People* magazine and could tell you all about this season's hottest clothing trends and which celebrity was sleeping with his nanny. But whether she had met you an hour earlier or you had been lifelong pals, she was your friend.

Her smile invited people into her life, and her laughter made them stay. But if you deserved it, if you crossed a line and patronized her because of her size or the fact that she was a blonde woman, she could be tough. She once told an older male colleague who patted her on the head to fuck off. When we met someone new at a party and they asked what her job was, I would pipe in: "She fires low-level employees in order to raise stock prices by five cents for multi-billion-dollar banks and insurance companies." Always quick to correct me, she'd say, "I don't actually fire anyone. I recommend headcount reductions and leave the firing of employees to someone else." Four years at an all-women's college and her time as a management consultant only intensified the spitfire attitude she'd been cultivating since birth.

I loved her for that.

After two years, Liz and I independently came to the same obvious decision: it was time to live in the same city. Though used to the distance, we no longer wanted to deal with it. When I called her one night and told her about my realization, we agreed that I would move to Los Angeles as soon as I finished up my classes and passed my master's exam—the PhD was put on hold.

I graduated at the end of January 2002, and less than a month later my things were packed and I was on a cross-country road trip to Los Angeles, set to move in with Liz. I arrived on her front step with a newly purchased, prized possession.

"What is that?" Liz said.

"It's an original drawing by Wesley Willis. It's the shoreline of Chicago and Wrigley Field."

"Well, it's not coming in the house."

"What? Why not?"

"Because it's huge and ugly. Wait. When did you buy that thing?"

I thought about lying, but I knew she'd see right through it, so I felt compelled to tell her the truth. "Uh, last week, just before I left Chicago. I wanted something to remind me of the city and I thought this was perfect."

Shaking her head, Liz asked, "How much did you pay for it?"

She knew that I had about three dollars in my bank account and a total of sixty-seven dollars of credit left on my Visa, because she'd had to pay for my U-Haul trailer and other moving supplies. Though I'd just told the truth, I used this opportunity for a little lie that I figured would keep me out of trouble. She was pissed that I'd bought this ugly-ass drawing, and she would have been even angrier if she knew how much I'd really paid for it.

"Uh, twenty dollars."

"You paid twenty dollars for a shitty ink drawing on a giant piece of tagboard? What the hell were you thinking?"

I have no idea why I lied. I mean, the thing actually cost me fifty dollars, so a thirty-dollar lie wasn't going to make a difference. What I didn't realize then was that the cost of the thing didn't really matter. It was the fact that I'd spent money when I didn't have any to spend, at a time when we were preparing to start our adult lives together as a couple. I was still living in the fantasy world of graduate school, where student loans were used for records and beer. I had no idea what it was like to be a financially responsible, unselfish adult.

My philosophy around that time was perfectly summed up by a T-shirt I saw on a homeless man on

the street outside of our apartment during my first week in Los Angeles: The Working Man's a Sucker. I didn't have a car, so I'd drop Liz off downtown each morning to make some money for us, then I'd pick her up later that evening. Every day, her first question was "Did you find any interesting jobs today?" I had a new excuse each time, but I didn't really need to tell her what she already knew: I spent my first few months in Los Angeles actively trying to not be the sucker mentioned on that shirt by hanging out with my other unemployed friends and attending tapings of *The Price Is Right*.

In June of that year, after more than a few arguments about my motivation level, and a little over three months after my daily fake job search began, one of Liz's friends recommended me for a job at an Internet company in Pasadena. I interviewed, and in their desperation to get a warm body in front of a computer screen, they offered me the job. My grandmother was appalled when she learned I went to work in shorts and flip-flops, spent most of the week playing foosball, and that Friday afternoons were dedicated to drinking beer at my desk. If only she'd known that I was writing ads for breast enhancement supplements and penis enlargement pills...

There was no real hope of advancement at my job. It was an hourly position, and I sort of just showed up and found novel ways to occupy my time until I could clock out for the day, earning salary increases that barely kept up with yearly cost-of-living adjustments. I didn't hate what I was doing, but I didn't love it.

Meanwhile, Liz moved up at her company, gaining titles and invaluable experience, and making more and more money. She also spent a significant amount of time traveling on consulting assignments. Though we finally lived together, months would go by when we'd see each other only on the weekends. For many couples, this extreme amount of time apart would be a real blow to the relationship, but for us it was just par for the course. It actually made the transition to living together a lot easier—if Liz had been home full-time, she would have immediately realized just how much of a lazy slob I was and probably would have kicked me out.

a few weeks
here, a couple of
months there,
nothing more than
a few seconds
when viewed through
the lens
of forever.

In early 2004 I received an e-mail from one of my college roommates, Biraj Bista, inviting Liz and me to Kathmandu for his wedding. I was excited. Going to Nepal had been high on my list of things to do since I'd met Biraj, but I never dreamed I'd actually have the money or the time to be able to go. It took a little convincing to get Liz to agree to the trip because we didn't have a ton of money at the time, and she knew that I would be unable to contribute a significant amount since I made less than half of her salary. But thanks to all of the frequent-flier miles she had racked up traveling for work over the past four years, the flight would be free. She knew how important this trip was to me, and she told me we'd make it work no matter what.

What Liz didn't know was that I planned on proposing to her a few days after our arrival in Nepal. I'm not exactly a traditionalist, so I wasn't going to ask her dad for permission or get down on one knee or hire a skywriter to write out my words with airplane exhaust. I always wanted our engagement to be different; I had hoped to surprise her with a ring in a foreign country with the idea that we'd someday make a special return trip there with our children, and this trip to Nepal came at the perfect time. We arranged to go on a short trek through the Annapurna region of the Himalayas. I pictured us hiking to the top of the mountain, at which time I'd whip out the ring and, crying, she'd scream, "Yes! Yes!"

But surprising Liz in any way was a tall order: our finances were closely intertwined, and marriage was a foregone conclusion for us. I'd saved almost no money, so my only hope for getting her the ring of her dreams was to take out a loan for the full amount. As soon as I'd secured it, I called A.J., my closest friend and my only friend who'd already taken the marriage plunge, to ask him where he bought the ring he gave to his wife. He put me in touch with a jeweler in Minnesota, an old friend of his parents who had designed pieces for his family. After eight years together and countless lectures about the "Four Cs," I knew exactly what Liz wanted, and A.J.'s jeweler was able to custom-make it to my specifications. I sent the guy a check, sight unseen. The ring arrived in the mail the day before we left for Kathmandu, and it was fucking gorgeous.

After a flight halfway around the world, we met up with Biraj and some of his friends, and as if we still were back in college, the beer began to flow. Liz lasted as long as she could that first night, but eventually her eyes began to close. I walked her to the hotel, put her to bed, and went back to drink

with the guys. We talked of Biraj's upcoming wedding, and about the women in everyone else's lives. When the conversation turned in my direction, Biraj asked when Liz and I were going to tie the knot. Without thinking, I told him that I planned on asking her to marry me when we reached the summit of our trek. There were congratulations all around and, of course, enough beer to require me to close one eye to walk a semistraight line back to the hotel.

I woke up early the next morning with one of the worst hangovers I'd ever had, but we were in a new country and we had to explore it. I thought back to the night before. What had I told the guys? Did they understand that this whole thing was supposed to be a surprise? Shit. I was picturing them congratulating Liz at the dinner party we were to attend that night, thus ruining my dream of surprising her with the ring. I knew what I had to do. Today was the day; it was not the day I wanted, but it would work.

As we walked through town, my sweating had nothing to do with the fact that it was 100 degrees. I tried to get Liz to the spot I'd randomly chosen that morning from the map we were given at our hotel, but she insisted on stopping at every shop along the way. It was so her. I kept my hands in my pockets, trying to hide the fact they were shaking uncontrollably, my right hand clutching the ugly green and white marbled cardboard box that held my promise to Liz. We finally reached Durbar Square, an historic area in the middle of Kathmandu known for its Hindu temples and wondrous architecture. It was obvious Liz was hot and tired, mostly because she kept bitching about both, and her complaining was making me even more nervous. I saw the perfect spot to sit her down and give her the ring, and I suggested we climb the steep stairs up to a temple.

"It's way too hot and the steps are too big for my short legs," Liz said. "Besides, there are monkey everywhere. I'm not going near those damn things." I pleaded with her to climb up with me, but there was no convincing her. She insisted that it was time to go back to our hotel. I started to panic.

"Liz..." I rarely began a sentence with her name, so she knew I was serious. "Can we please just sit down in the shade before heading back to the hotel!" I said this with the kind of frantic urgency usually reserved for demanding that some awful pop song playing in her car be turned off before my ears started bleeding. So she agreed.

We were now as alone as we could be in such a public place, and I had to do something to stop my hand from shaking. I pulled the box from my pocket, and without a word I handed it to Liz. She looked more surprised than I'd ever seen her, and without opening it she said, "Oh my God! You bought me earrings!"

I just shook my head. "Open it."

She lifted the top of the box and immediately started crying. And screaming. Her high-pitched screams attracted the attention of everyone within earshot, including a man sweeping the inside of the temple who poked his head out of a door to make sure everything was okay.

I smiled, knowing that I had succeeded in making her happy, and I was thrilled that my vision had mostly been realized. She couldn't have been more surprised if I'd told her I was a woman. I wasn't sure this was how Liz had pictured her engagement when she dreamed of it as a little girl. We were both unshowered, wearing white T-shirts (mine with yellow stains under the arms), and looking as jaded as we felt, but for us it was the most perfect imperfect moment.

We decided to get married in our hometown of Minneapolis, Minnesota, so that our friends and family wouldn't have to travel to attend, and we set a date of August 13, 2005. I'm not a superstitious guy, but I suggested we choose a different date, reminding Liz that our anniversary would eventually fall on a Friday. But she said, "I checked out the *Farmer's Almanac*, and the thirteenth of August is

historically the best Saturday of the month, weather-wise.” Holy shit. I should have known. She had seriously examined the historical weather patterns to ensure perfection. She was a masterful planner, and for this wedding to be a success she had to be. We were living in Los Angeles, but for eight months leading up to the wedding, Liz was traveling each week to Connecticut for work, all while planning our wedding in a third state. To no one’s surprise, and with very little help from me, she executed it perfectly. It was elegant, beautiful, and dreamlike, just like Liz.

Surrounded by more than two hundred of our favorite people, we put a label on the love we’d felt for each other from the first moment of our second meeting. I can still see the huge smile on her face, her body wrapped in a cloud of white, and her feet enveloped, making it appear as though she were floating. She commanded the attention of everyone in the room, and not simply because she was the bride. It was her presence and the radiant beauty that flowed forth from every pore in her body that had everyone watching her every move. I can still remember the scent of Stargazer lilies permeating every piece of fabric in the place, from Liz’s dress to the linen napkin I used to dab the tears from my eyes as I thought once again that she could never be more beautiful than she was that night.

A few months after returning from our honeymoon in Greece, we sat down for dinner and a serious conversation. Liz told me that she was sick of traveling and that she wanted to find a different job that wouldn’t require so much of it. When I questioned whether or not we could afford such a change, she told me that she didn’t care if she had to take a pay cut—she wanted to be at home with me. She wanted us to be together. She loved her job, but she was willing to give it all up to be with me.

I don’t know if it was marriage, maturity, or possibly even fear, but just a month after Liz told me that she was quitting her job so we could be together, I volunteered to move to Bangalore, India, for a major six-month-long work project. It was a temporary reassignment, but if I did well, it could have led to much larger responsibilities. When I told Liz, she was thrilled—I knew she would be. She saw me taking initiative at work, and she knew what this would mean for us. Though it wasn’t ideal, delaying our time together by six months would bring us closer to fulfilling the dreams we had for the future: a house in Los Angeles and, soon after, a baby.

I left for Bangalore on a Sunday in March 2006—the day before Liz was to start her new job at Disney. It would be three months before we saw each other, which was the longest we would have been apart since we’d started dating. In May she came to Bangalore and I took a couple of weeks off so we could travel through South India before heading north to visit the Golden Triangle area and, most important to Liz, the Taj Mahal. We had the time of our lives seeing sights together that we had only dreamed of, but before we knew it we were back to the routine we knew so well: daily phone calls, nightly e-mails, and the occasional video chat.

I arrived home from India a few days before our first wedding anniversary and promised Liz that I would never leave her again. But after two months back at work, I was asked to return to India to help get a new team up and running. The assignment would mean a huge increase in pay, a salaried position with a well-defined career path, and, finally, a challenge. It was a tremendous step forward for me, but I had just promised to never, ever, leave Liz again. When I talked to her about what was going on, she cried, but mostly out of excitement. There was something in her reaction this time, a slight look of disappointment that made me think she didn’t want me to leave her, though. She had already given up so much for me, and I had just returned from six months abroad and was now preparing to leave her again, but we both knew I needed to take this job.

By December, I was back in Bangalore. Liz came out to see me toward the end of the month, and for the first time for either of us, we spent Christmas away from our families. It was an emotional

visit. We had obviously missed each other terribly, but finally we were truly in a place that would make possible a home and a family and our happily-ever-after. I decided that this was what it felt like to be an adult.

When I returned to Los Angeles a few months later, Liz must have picked up on my newly achieved sense of adulthood. She told me that she wanted to buy a house before the year was over. I knew what that really meant: she wanted to be pregnant before the year was over. She didn't have to convince me—I was ready, really ready, to become a father. I felt like together we would be fucking amazing parents. In May we found the house of our dreams, a house we couldn't ever have had in Minnesota, complete with lemon, grapefruit, and orange trees in the yard.

And four months later we found out we were going to be parents.

together during
the worst of times
is better than
being alone at
the best of times.

Early on in Liz's pregnancy, there were concerns about the health of our child. She had awful morning sickness. I mean *awful*. I called it "morning, noon, and night" sickness. It was so bad that her obstetrician, Dr. Sharon Nelson, prescribed her Zofran, which is usually given to people undergoing chemotherapy to help them control the nausea. Liz was worried about taking the medication, but Dr. Nelson assured us that it wouldn't harm the fetus. Though it did little to actually help her feel better, she took it for almost her entire pregnancy.

More often than not, the nausea led to vomiting, and with the vomiting came a significant loss of nutrients to Liz and to our baby. The nausea also ruined Liz's appetite, so she ended up losing weight and as a result our baby was not gaining the expected amount of weight at each gestational age. To assess the situation, Dr. Nelson suggested we see an ultrasound doctor, Dr. Gregory DeVore.

Dr. DeVore's primary concern was the health of the fetus. That's not to say that he didn't care about the health of the mother, but we were warned by some parents in the area that Dr. DeVore had a bedside manner that made him seem rather cold. More than one of these people referred to him as Dr. Doom because of his proclivity to present the worst-case scenario. When we arrived at his office, I immediately felt that his waiting room was one of the most depressing places I had ever visited. On the walls there were photos of Dr. DeVore surrounded by his large brood, giving me the feeling that the photos were there to provide reassurance that the babies in his care would turn out as healthy as his own kids had—apparently, if the recommendation of your ob-gyn along with this guy's copious certifications, published works, and awards didn't make you believe that this guy knew what he was doing, then these photos would. It wasn't just the decor, though. The waiting room was filled with expectant couples. Yeah, families. Unlike every trip I'd made with Liz to Dr. Nelson's office, there were actually men in this waiting room. Maybe the seriousness of these tests convinced them that they should be there to hold their wives' hands, but I found the presence of these men most disconcerting.

Many of these families were here because an earlier test had indicated something of concern. Others, like us, were there preemptively, hoping to rule out their worst fears. But everyone in the room had the same sullen and pale look, and it was obvious that they were wondering the exact same thing that we were: were they about to hear that their unborn child would be the one out of every thirty-three babies born with birth defects? I still remember the words from Dr. DeVore's website that followed that shitty statistic—that these birth defects are the "leading cause of infant death and childhood disability." We hoped this visit would rule out the unnerving possibility that our baby would wind up dead or disabled, and we saw firsthand how quickly that hope could disappear. More than once we

watched as a woman, held tightly by her partner, was led through the doors in tears. We knew exactly what that meant, and each time Liz squeezed my hand a little tighter.

The door opened and a nurse popped her head through, calling Liz in. As she lay down on the exam table, I sat down next to her and grabbed her hand, aiming to give her the kind of reassurance that only the report of a completely healthy baby could provide. Within minutes, Dr. DeVore entered the room, sat down at Liz's side, and with very few words began to perform the ultrasound.

I know that Liz had a thousand questions for the doctor; she *always* had a thousand questions, and can't think of a time in our twelve years together when she bit her tongue. But here, she was intimidated into silence by Dr. DeVore, and she let him do his work in the quiet. He did speak a couple of times—not to us, but to the nurse in the room, who was taking notes. Even if he had been speaking to us, there's no way we would have understood his medical jargon. Just a few minutes later, he was pulling off his rubber gloves and walking toward the counter near the door, still without a word to us. Liz was practically jumping off the table, waiting for any sort of information.

Finally he spoke: "Liz, your amniotic fluid level is low, your baby is very underweight for the gestational age, and the umbilical cord is wrapped around its neck. You're going to have to go on bed rest for the next three weeks, beginning by lying on your right side. When you can no longer handle lying on your right side, then switch to your left side. When you can no longer handle that, switch back to your right side. You'll come back in three weeks so I can check you out again."

And with that, he was out the door. Liz immediately started crying, and I felt as though I'd been punched in the stomach.

"What the fuck?" I said to Liz.

The nurse tried to calm us down with an explanation of what the doctor had said so tersely. "It's just a precaution. The low amniotic fluid is a concern, because a normal amniotic fluid level is like a shock absorber. It offers the fetus some protection from being jostled around as you carry on your normal daily activities. If you spend the next three weeks lying on your side, there's a much lower risk of causing damage to the fetus, and the hope is that all of the calories you'd normally expend walking through your office or around your house will go directly to the baby, which will help her gain weight."

It made perfect sense, but we were both thinking the same thing: how was Liz going to lie still for three straight weeks?

"What about the umbilical cord around her neck?" Liz asked.

"That oftentimes corrects itself," answered the nurse.

There were a few more questions from Liz and a few more answers from the nurse, but I really wasn't paying attention. I was too distracted wondering if our child was going to become a statistic.

And so just like that, Liz stopped working and followed the doctor's orders. No more constant trips to public restrooms to vomit or lunch hours spent catching up on sleep in the car. Liz completed her three weeks of bed rest, complaining far less than I thought she might. I did everything I could to make her life easier when I was around, and when I had to leave the house, I only wished I could be at home with her.

When we found ourselves back in Dr. DeVore's office, he said, "Things don't look any better. You need to go to the hospital immediately. You'll be there until your baby is born." Fuck.

Liz was devastated. For some reason we had both been under the clearly mistaken impression that the three weeks of strict bed rest would be the magic cure for all of the problems Dr. DeVore had previously diagnosed. Obviously not. Then I realized our daughter wasn't due for another nine weeks and I had a physical reaction to my fear. I've never been so scared in my life—my entire body was

shaking. I tried my best to suppress it in an attempt to be strong for Liz, but I was holding her hand and she could feel it.

“Immediately?” Did this mean that our baby was in some sort of grave danger? Now it was me who had a thousand questions, but I sensed that there wasn’t time for any of them; we needed to get to the hospital. Luckily, the nearest one was less than half a mile from Dr. DeVore’s office. We jumped in my car, and a few minutes later Liz was filling out admission papers. While we were checking in, a group of expectant parents and a hospital staff member walked past us on a tour of the maternity ward. We never got the chance to take that tour. Nor did we take any birthing classes. I realized then just how useless I’d be to Liz when it finally came time for her to give birth.

This new hospital setup required us both to adjust, and neither of us found it that easy. There were all sorts of medical machinery, scheduled tests, a ton of staff in and out of the room, and little comfort or privacy. We had to make our own entertainment. For the duration of her stay, Liz was required to wear leg cuffs that helped circulate the blood in her calves to keep potential blood clots at bay. She hated how hot they made her feel, and one afternoon she decided to remove them. Not long after, a nurse entered the room and noticed the cuffs dangling from the end of the bed.

“What are you doing?” she screamed like a mother who had just busted her teenage son with a stack of porn. “You must keep these on! Not wearing them can kill you! It’s happened before and it will happen again!”

Liz just nodded as the nurse put the cuffs back on her lower legs, but as soon as the door closed behind her, Liz lost it.

“Fuck her! I mean, I know she’s right, but she didn’t have to yell at me like that. How scary! God! What a bitch.”

I let out an uneasy laugh as the words came from her mouth, and then I agreed with her. “Yeah, the nurse is a bitch.” But that was the last time Liz ever removed those leg cuffs without consulting a nurse. No matter how painful the procedure, no matter how awful and uncomfortable she felt, she knew she had to endure it—and she wanted to, because her only concern was delivering a healthy baby as close to full-term as possible. She made it her job, and once it became her job, it was her singular focus. That was just Liz. Once her mind was set on something, she not only had to complete the task but she had to do it as well as she possibly could.

Even though we lived closer than a ten-minute drive to the hospital, I refused to let Liz spend even one night by herself. I was there as much as I humanly had time to be; this pregnancy was bringing us so much closer, and I just couldn’t let her do it alone. I slept on an extremely uncomfortable foldout chair, waking up at least once every hour when some random alarm would go off, or when Liz woke me up to tell me to cover my ears so she could use the bedpan. (I have a passionate, lifelong hatred for the sound of anyone peeing.) My schedule was the same every day: I left the hospital before six o’clock each morning, to avoid the daily parking charge, and headed home to take a shower and change my clothes. I spent most of my days at work thinking about our soon-to-be-delivered baby while replying to e-mails from Liz:

Watching *Titanic*. You’re soooooo lucky you’re at work.

Meatballs sound so good tonight. Can you pick some up before you come up here?

I just had the BEST mani/pedi in my hospital room, thanks to Mari.

I’m watching midget madness on *Jerry Springer*... AAAAHH!

I would leave my office after eight hours of being too distracted to accomplish anything, and stop home just long enough to grab our mail, pick grapefruit from our tree for the nurses, and gather flowers from our yard for Liz. I would pick up meatballs, mint chocolate chip ice cream from Baskin Robbins or whatever she was craving at the moment, and deliver it to her hospital room. We ate together, watched shitty television, listened to the music I thought she should hear, entertained guests during visiting hours, and talked on the phone to friends and family about how we were doing.

Liz was often not up to taking visitors, sometimes because she felt nauseous, other times because she thought she didn't look cute enough. Instead of telling them not to visit, though, she insisted that I was happy to entertain them, usually just outside of our room, in the lobby of the hospital, or in the cafeteria. When the phone calls became too much for Liz to handle and I grew unwilling to repeat the same mundane story to friends and family all over the world, I decided that I'd update my blog each evening so that everyone had a central source of information whenever they had a question or wanted to know how our baby was doing. It was a website that I'd had for years but rarely posted to—nobody but my mother checked it. Liz thought this was a good alternative to answering the endless stream of calls that flooded our evenings, but she insisted that I not post any photos of her lying in a hospital bed.

As much as I complained at the time, I was happy to be there with Liz, especially learning things about her that I didn't yet know. For example, I never knew that her lucky number was seven, or that she considered herself Catholic even though she wasn't religious. In retrospect, it feels strange that we had never discussed these things before, but in the hospital we had nothing to do but talk. When we were apart, we hadn't had the luxury of discussing mundane details, as we were in different parts of the world, where conversations were either expensive or difficult to conduct due to the constraints posed by different time zones. And these simple conversations were not urgent; we were looking forward to a long life together during which such details would eventually emerge.

During our waking hours, when Liz was most worried, I put on a smile, used a confident tone, and assured her that everything would be okay as I sat next to her in her hospital bed, softly stroking her IV-free arm. "Our baby will be perfect...she has you as a mother." That always brought a smile to her face. When she'd finally fall asleep, I'd sit on that back-ruining foldout chair and worry about how things would turn out. Yeah, she was going to have Liz as a mother, but she was going to have me as a father, and that couldn't be good. I'd felt fairly sure of myself over the last seven months, but now that our child was closer to being born, I was far less certain that I'd be a good parent. More worrisome for our baby in the short term, however, was the unknown: her health. We had no idea what was really going on inside Liz's womb, and this early in the pregnancy we didn't want to know—really knowing could only come after delivery and it was too early.

Liz had seemed so confident of the health of our child, but after she entered the hospital her entire outlook changed. She was visibly worried, looking ashen and sad when we were alone. It was quite a reversal of roles for us. I had always been the pessimist in our relationship while Liz was the optimist. But a lot of the concerns she had early in her pregnancy were no longer the stuff of ob-gyn warnings; now they were very real possibilities.

While in the hospital, she had been reading a book about premature babies. One night she was so fed up with the negativity spewing forth from its pages that she sat up straight in her hospital bed and threw it to the other end of the room. "Fuck this piece of shit!" I looked up from my computer screen

as the words left her lips and the book hit the whiteboard listing the names of her nurse and personal care attendant for the day.

“That was one hell of a throw,” I said, and turned to see her shaking as though she’d just been retrieved from beneath the surface of a frozen lake. Clearly this was no time for one of my jokes. I picked the book up from the floor and crawled into bed with her, doing everything I could to hug the pain away. After she calmed down, I opened the book and flipped straight to the copyright page. “Liz, this book was published in 1978,” I said. “I guarantee things have advanced in the field of premature babies in the last thirty years.” That was enough to coax a small chuckle from her, and for one more day I felt like I had done my best work, supporting my wife and best friend.

At night, when it got late and the visits from hospital staff became less frequent, Liz and I would fantasize about our future with our daughter. Liz talked of traveling the world, shopping for shoes and purses, mother-daughter spa trips for manis, pedis, and massages, and high tea at the ever-so-elegant Huntington Library. I talked of autumn nights at Dodger Stadium, shopping for records, father-daughter fishing trips to Alaska with her uncle Nick, and beers and Shirley Temples at the Polish restaurant down the street from our house.

As soon as we could possibly find out the sex of our baby, we did. Well, that wasn’t my choice. I had this very romantic belief that giving birth should be one of the great surprises in our life, but Liz disagreed.

“How am I supposed to have a baby shower without knowing the sex of our child?” Liz asked.

“I don’t know. How about doing what Neolithic humans did?” I responded.

“What’s that?”

“Register for gender-neutral gifts.”

At this, she rolled her eyes, which she often did in response to my sorry-ass attempts at humor. Deep down I knew that this was an argument I’d never win, because one of Liz’s finest traits was to obtain all available data so that she could have every last detail planned out. I knew it was important to Liz, so I followed her lead.

When Dr. Nelson asked us if we were ready to learn the sex of our baby, Liz brought her hands together just under her chin, clapping expeditiously, the way she always did when she was excited, and let out a squeal that indicated she was indeed ready. With a few swipes of the transducer probe and a couple of tilts of the resulting photograph, Dr. Nelson said, “It’s a girl!”

A girl.

I used to scowl at the little girls at the baseball stadium, covered head to toe in pink Dodgers gear, jumping up and down in the aisles, waving pom-poms and screaming at the top of their lungs even when the ball wasn’t in play.

“Little boys don’t do this kind of shit,” I’d say. “Can’t these girls just shut the hell up and watch the game?”

“You’ll think it’s so cute when we have a little girl and she does it,” Liz would answer.

“Maybe, but I think that’s what *you* want.”

We both started crying as soon as we heard Dr. Nelson’s words. To be honest, it wasn’t just Liz who wanted a girl. I have no idea what the hell it was, but something in me changed the day we learned she was pregnant, and from that moment on I only pictured us with a girl in our lives. But it didn’t mean it wasn’t without fear.

Liz envisioned a mini-Liz, which I was actively trying to avoid for a couple of reasons. First, I knew having two strong-willed women in my house would make it hard for me to get my way. Second, I wanted to turn our daughter into a tomboy to keep the boys away from her as she got older. Liz

wasn't exactly thrilled with this plan, but I told her it was better than my first thought.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Well, if she looks anything like you, we're doomed, so I think we should consider giving her a nifty little ear-to-ear scar."

"Jesus, Matt. That's not funny."

"I know," I said. "It's not a joke."

Of course, it was a joke, and I knew she knew it was, because she gave me that slight look of disapproval I saw whenever I made a crass comment. But that was my role in our relationship. I had to do something to lighten the mood, because as we lay there night after night, trying to ignore the hum of the heart monitor and other hospital equipment, the future we dreamed of seemed so far away.

How the fuck did this happen to us?

baby's heart rate dropped around 3:30 a.m.
everyone was concerned.
dr. stopped by in the morning.
and said that it may be best
to have madeline come out and play.

I always sort of imagined something out of a '50s television show: Liz would shoot out of bed in the middle of the night, shake me awake, and yell at me to get her overnight bag and the keys to the car because the baby was coming. I'd say, "Are you sure? How far apart are the contractions?" and she'd say, "Trust me. This is gonna happen tonight." I'd be nervous, trying to remember the breathing exercises we'd learned in those birthing classes. I'd put on an unmatched pair of shoes and trip on a few things on the way out the door like some slapstick comedian. I'd get her in the car and realize I had forgotten her overnight bag in the house. We'd rush to the hospital, get pulled over for speeding, and then, after shouting at the cop in my exasperated voice, "My wife is having a baby!" we'd get a police escort the rest of the way there. I'd pace the halls of the hospital with Liz's father, my father, and my stepfather, waiting for the doctor to come out and announce that we had a healthy baby girl. "Ten toes and ten fingers!" the doctor would say, and we'd all shake hands, slap backs, and smoke cigars. And then? Happily ever after, of course.

Early on a Monday morning before I'd left the hospital for work, an alarm went off in the nurses' station, just outside of room #7. Liz's room. Her lucky #7. A nurse came in and told us the news: our baby's heart rate had once again experienced a significant drop, which meant that today was the day we'd finally meet our child. Many factors went into the decision, but the doctors simply believed it was time. With Liz's amniotic fluid level still low and our growing baby taking up more and more space in her womb, the possibility of damage to our daughter became a serious concern. In addition, she got bigger, the umbilical cord got tighter around her neck, so if her heart rate showed a sustained drop it indicated a possible lack of oxygen getting to her brain and other parts of her body. They determined that our daughter would be better off out in the world than in Liz's womb. We experienced a mix of excitement and fear; we were definitely ready to hold our baby, but she was still seven weeks early, and we were terrified that she might be too young to survive.

While one of the nurses was talking to Liz, I called our parents and told them to get on the next flight to Los Angeles because their granddaughter would be making her first appearance sometime before noon. Liz's parents and my mom all said they'd be in Los Angeles before the day was over. My stepfather was unable to make it due to a work conflict, and my dad and stepmother were in Florida on vacation, but they promised to come out in a couple of weeks for the trip they'd already booked to coincide with our baby's scheduled due date. I called Anya, Liz's best friend, and told her to ditch work and come to the hospital because Liz wanted her in the recovery room after the C-section.

I posted something on the blog for the rest of our friends and family. It was a simple photo of the

whiteboard in Liz's hospital room. Preprinted on the board were the words, "Today is..." Underneath I wrote, "~~March 24, 2008~~—and Madeline will be here in about 1 hour." It was the first time I had ever written out my daughter's name. Seeing it there on that board, in my handwriting, and knowing that today was the day we would finally meet her, made my heart feel like it was going to burst.

As soon as we had learned that Liz was pregnant, we began our search for the perfect name. She kept a book of baby names on her bedside table, and we started at the beginning, taking turns thumbing through a new letter each night, calling out names to the one not holding the book. We had pretty simple criteria for choosing our child's name: it couldn't rhyme with anything terrible, it couldn't be the name of any girl/woman from our past who was in any way insufferable, and it couldn't be the name of any of my ex-girlfriends. I suggested names of women in my favorite songs and books, and Liz suggested names of strong females throughout history. Each of us rejected the other's idea for one of the reasons mentioned above.

It was on the thirteenth night that Liz called out a name that neither one of us objected to. "What do you think of Madeline?" she asked.

"I love it."

And that was the last time we opened the book.

Choosing a middle name was a bit more difficult. We hadn't even considered one until Liz's very first delivery scare. One of the nurses asked us to fill out some paperwork, and when she got to the spot for middle name, she paused.

"We need to come up with a middle name for Madeline."

It hadn't occurred to either of us.

A few days later, we still didn't have any ideas. I was walking through the halls of the maternity ward and I stopped at the window of the nursery. I looked from baby to baby, hoping that when ours was born, she would be as big and as healthy as they all appeared, when it came to me: Madeline's middle name should be Elizabeth.

I ran back to the room, excited to share the news with Liz.

"No way," she said. "It's way too narcissistic."

"What? I think it's cute. Think about it: Maddy is similar to my name, and with your name as her middle name, she'd sort of be named after both of us."

She digested my point of view for a few seconds, and then her contemplative look gave in to that huge smile that meant she was thrilled.

"I don't hate it," she said playfully.

As the nurses came in and prepared Liz for her delivery, I made a mental note of all the things I needed for the big moment. Still camera: check. Video camera: check. I had no intention of photographing or recording any parts of the birthing process, mainly because the thought of watching it had me hyperventilating; I simply planned on taking some abstract shots of the delivery room and possibly a shot of our daughter, but only after the doctors and nurses removed all the nasty birthing goo from her. I brought the video camera to record Liz's trip to and from the delivery room, capturing our moments together just before and just after our child was born. That was it. No breathing exercises to remember, no overnight bag to forget at home—just some electronic equipment.

We heard a knock and then saw Anya's head peek through a crack in the doorway. Liz's face lit up immediately and the tears began to flow. She had this sadly beautiful way of crying when she felt an overwhelming sense of relief: her lower lip would quiver, her eyes would open wide, and her head would tilt slightly to the left. Despite the uncertainty of the situation she was about to face, she

instantly felt better when her best friend arrived. Anya and Liz went to college together at Scripps and had been almost inseparable since they had met, becoming even closer after the rest of their group of friends moved away from Southern California. They were always there for one another, but more important, Anya was always there for me, indulging Liz's shopping fantasies when I didn't feel like watching her try on twenty-five different outfits or listening to her drone on and on about some idea she had for redecorating the house. I never heard Liz laugh as loud or as hard as she did when she was with her best friend. Liz was always at her happiest in Anya's company, and I was a very, very close second. Aside from the big reason that Anya was at the hospital, this day was no different than any other time they got together. They were laughing hysterically and I was rolling my eyes at their inside jokes.

A few minutes later, we heard another knock on the door. This time it was Dr. Nelson. She entered the room with a huge smile, bringing Liz even more tears of relief. Dr. Nelson shared with us information about the delivery, answered some last-minute questions, and reassured us that things were going to go great. Liz asked again if our baby would be okay if she came out today.

"Yes," the doctor replied. "At this point it's safer for her to be outside the womb than inside." To illustrate the point, she unfolded the long printout, a pink and white grid with a black line representing our baby's heart rate over the past several hours. Liz and I had become uncertified experts in reading these over the past three weeks. When Dr. Nelson without so much as a word pointed to a dramatic dip in the line, indicating a significant and prolonged drop in our baby's heart rate, it was obvious to us that she had to come out. And soon. "Don't worry," Dr. Nelson continued, sensing our growing anxiety. "I'm an expert in getting them out. But I have no idea what to do with them after that. That's going to be up to you and Matt."

I had gotten to know Dr. Nelson quite well during the previous seven months, meeting her monthly during Liz's checkups. She was just the kind of doctor I pictured taking care of my wife: confident, intelligent, and funny. Almost more important than being an amazing and highly skilled physician was the fact that she seemed better able to read people than most doctors. She always knew exactly what to say to Liz to make her feel better, no matter the situation. During one appointment, Liz was crushed to learn that she had not gained the expected amount of weight for someone at her pregnancy stage. I'm not sure if Dr. Nelson could sense the fear in Liz's questions or if she saw the tears welling up in her eyes, but she said, "Nicole Richie just gave birth to a healthy baby girl, and she couldn't have weighed more than eighty pounds during the final days of her pregnancy. Liz, your baby's going to be just fine." With that, Liz looked up from her lap. It took a special doctor to know that there was nothing like a pop-culture reference to make Liz feel better about her own situation.

Now, Dr. Nelson left the room, and I could tell that Liz was getting more and more nervous as the time to deliver approached. I went to her bed and held her hands. As I rubbed her palm with my thumb, I kissed her on the cheek then whispered in her ear, telling her just how excited I was to finally see the daughter we had created. I'll never forget how beautiful she looked at that moment. She was pale, but this ethereal glow emanated from her. The pain she felt clouded the room, yet her eyes had an incredible gleam, like she knew that this hard-fought battle was almost over and that everything was going to work out just as we had hoped it would.

When the time arrived to wheel Liz to her first meeting with our baby, I grabbed the cameras and followed behind. With a nurse at Liz's head pushing her bed down the hallway and Anya by her side holding her hand, I filmed the entire ride from room number #7 to the delivery room. Once we entered a sterile hallway through a set of double doors, the nurse informed me that they had to do a bit of prep work before Liz's C-section, and told me to wait outside the delivery room until someone called me

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